

HIS CASTE

ON the map of the world there is a place called Suez. As a habitation of men it is unimportant save in one respect. Of Suez it is said that he who goes east or comes west to dwell across that spot on the border line between the Occident and the Orient will never be quite the same man to his own people afterwards, that the Occidental becomes vaguely orientalized—and the Oriental—concerning him let us take the case of Ram Nath.

Sivaji Ram Nath, as his name implies, was a Hindoo of high caste. What breath of Kismet it was which stirred in him the desire to acquire academic knowledge west of Suez, instead of taking the usual course at a native university leading directly to a position of patent leather shoes and gold spectacles in the Secretariat, Indra knows—this writer does not. In any case, Ram Nath came west of Suez to seek modern education, very far west considering that he crossed the Atlantic and landed in New York.

Though Ram Nath had discarded native garb in favor of a European ready-made suit, and removed the caste mark from his forehead before leaving Bombay, it must be understood he was still a Hindoo to the finger tips of his ethics on reaching the United States. As witness the revolting, sickening horror with which he first cast eyes on a Sixth Avenue butcher shop, for there were carcasses of beef—the sacred animal—exposed for the most sacrilegious of purposes. In his native town such a spectacle would incite the whole populace to a

frenzy of riot, and the might of the British Empire in India would hasten to end that butcher shop for its own sake. For the moment it struck at the foundation of his civilization, causing him to stand as one petrified by an unthinkable evil. Then he fled back to his room, where he shut himself in to write home in guarded language, lest he be set down for a profane liar, of the appalling thing his eyes had beheld. In comparison to this abhorrent wonder, skyscrapers, electric cars, and the amazing freedom of unveiled women dwindled almost into insignificance. Assuredly they were strange gods whom the Americans worshiped.

But after his patient kind Ram Nath was persistent. His purpose was to return to India with a university degree which he hoped would win for him immediate recognition in the Secretariat. Therefore he presently ventured forth to begin his college studies, carefully avoiding the region of butcher shops, and by other ways, such as cooking his own food, endeavoring to preserve his caste. In the meantime his father, uncles and brothers, in a town of the sultry Central Indian plateau, backed him with the family fortune, so that he might come to be their chief pride, *i.e.*, eventually support them all on the salary of his Secretariat position. Though utterly benighted in his methods, the pious Hindoo may be given credit for looking hopefully forward to shifting the burden of personal support onto the shoulders of any more enterprising relative. From his family Ram Nath received regular remittances, the gossip of his town, but above all strict injunction to preserve his caste. Upon that depended his whole career in India, at least according to his father's precept.

At exactly what period Ram Nath began to lose

caste it would be difficult to answer—to drink from a polluted cup being sufficient. But this much is certain, that a few weeks' residence in New York found him passing a butcher shop without a shock to his conscience; a little later he began to save himself trouble by purchasing cooked food upon the solemn assurance that beef fat did not enter into its preparation, and then he went downhill by an easy grade until he was tempted to save time by lunching at the college commons. Not until a fellow Hindoo student of low caste reminded him that he was actually eating beef, in the form of a satisfying and palatable stew, did Ram Nath realize he had tossed his caste to the winds.

"Hai, Nathji!" smiled the Hindoo fellow student, with a familiarity he would never have ventured upon in India. "We be all equal here. No one wears a caste mark in this country. I do not have to be careful lest my shadow fall on Your Godship's food."

"That is progress and modern civilization," returned Ram Nath. "I am for liberty and freedom. It is what we need in India."

"India!" repeated the other. "True, that is what we need. But consider, O Nathji, what would be said in India could it be known you were eating beef at the same table with one of my degraded social position? For me, who am of low caste, it would not go well—this stew of beef which is very good; but to your family how would you explain?"

For a short space Ram Nath shifted in his chair, like a man who, easy in his mind regarding the commission of a crime, suddenly has the finger of detection pointed at him. Presently he waved the unpleasant thought aside with a gesture.

"Those are foolish ideas. I have passed beyond that stage. Perhaps I shall not return; but if I do—"

"Ah!" interjected the other. "But if you do, O Nathji?"

"Who—will know?" he answered, lifting his shoulders slightly. "For the present I am like the Americans. See"—he beckoned to the waiter—"I order pie made with lard; that is pig's fat, and the gods do not fall upon me. *Bus!* Enough! That is all nonsense."

Thus was Ram Nath's decision taken and his future course laid clear. Thenceforth he strove to cut his cloth entirely according to the American pattern, and his letters home at longer intervals were eulogistic of conditions in the New World. To these came replies proving that what he wrote was not understood, but reiterating the parental injunction regarding his caste. Otherwise, as Ram Nath possessed the politeness of the Oriental in addition to a studious intelligence, he made friends in certain American circles. He was even guilty of playing baseball, very creditably indeed considering that his strength lay rather in brain than muscle. Finally he took his A. M. degree with honors, and according to his original plan should have departed for India. But if an A. M. degree would help him in the Secretariat, how much more might be gained by a post-graduate course! That was the excuse he offered his family for remaining in America. But there was another reason.

Ram Nath had become enamored of an American girl—a professional dancer. Friendly relations between the two had been brought about through her desire to portray a Vedic character. That was all there was on her part. But in return for his indefati-

gable labor of instruction, the grateful nods and smiles and the sweetly spoken, "Oh, Mr. Ram Nath, you are just too lovely for anything to go to all this trouble!" sank into the depth of his Oriental nature, and there kindled all manner of vain dreams. That was the real motive why Ram Nath had pretty well set India aside in his future reckoning, as he had previously tossed away his caste. At least he remembered it only to the extent of writing home for costumes which could not be procured in New York, and covertly lying about their purpose by saying they were to aid in spreading the truth of Brahma, according to the sacred dance of the temple. To be sure the dance was to take place before a painted plaster figure of Shiva, but the stage of a vaudeville theater is hardly the same thing as a Hindoo temple. It was not of course praiseworthy in Ram Nath so to deceive his people, but then what will a man not do for the woman upon whom his being is set? Let the daily newspaper bear witness of worse than the prevarication of Ram Nath. So Ram Nath trod the path which others have gone before, cherishing crumbs and scraps of comfort strewn by her hand on the wayside. Perhaps she rather liked Ram Nath; probably she was sincerely grateful for his efforts in her behalf—he, even he, painting the dummy image of his god for a playhouse and setting upon its forehead the mark of his caste—but beyond that Indra alone knows what is in the thought of a woman.

Let the success of her first performance be accepted, for is it not written in print how she grasped with subtle insight the mysterious nature of the Vedic character she represented, and carried her interpretation of it to a dramatic triumph? A half-dozen calls before the

curtain! On that score, what more need be said? But concerning the other drama of which the audience saw nothing, its *finale* came in the hour of personal congratulation. It was to a young man of her own tribe she first turned with the light of supreme joy in her eyes, and not—not to Ram Nath. Had he been truly conversant with American ways he might have gained an inkling of the situation before, but how was he to discover until his error was clearly apparent? How was he to know? Had she not smiled sweetly upon him and given to him many pleasant words? In India there could not be greater encouragement. Ram Nath did not give any sign at the moment of emotions, which, as it were, had been torn up by the roots and scattered. His feelings were not unlike those when he was struck dumb with horror at the public exposure of the sacred kine. He merely slipped unnoticed from the congratulating group and fled to his room as he had done before. He knew nothing of the search which was made when his absence was discovered, and how she was quite distressed when he failed to respond to her summons. But those Orientals were such curious folk. You never quite understood them. That was how it seemed to her.

When Ram Nath had shut the door upon that outer American world, after all so impossible to understand, he found thrust beneath the door a letter bearing the postmark of his native town. He opened it with nervous fingers and read by the light of his student's lamp. The meaning of that letter was perfectly clear. First, rebuke in that he had failed to write for several months. Then a parental demand that he return as soon as possible. For these reasons: The crops had failed and the gaunt hand of famine was stretched over the land.

Rents had fallen into arrears, and recourse to the money lender resulted in exorbitant terms. Therefore no more money could be sent for him to continue his studies. It was, in fact, high time he applied for the Secretariat position, which, if obtained, would replenish the family purse. Moreover, Ram Nath's child wife had now come to the years when it was his duty to take her to his home. At such a crisis her marriage portion would be of great assistance. Truly his gods were summoning him to an account. He must return, since all that had seemed sure ground in America had suddenly slipped from under his feet.

Ram Nath set to work at once making preparations. He spent the night destroying many things, among others those scraps and crumbs of comfort on which he had raised such a delusive structure. Morning found him with one small trunk packed and all obligations settled to the uttermost cent. A little later he took a car downtown for a steamship office. A vessel was sailing at noon, and he managed to secure a passage relinquished at the last moment. This settled, his eyes wandered to a telephone, and he requested permission to use it. When he had called up a certain number, he spoke with even, deliberate tones. "Yes, I leave at noon. . . . You are surprised? But I have news which compels me to return to India at once You are sorry? Yes, I, too, am very sorry. But I must go. . . . Thank you. I am glad you are so fortunate. . . . ° No, I do not think it will be permitted that I shall come to this country again. . . . Please do not trouble to see me off. You, you have so much else of more importance."

Ram Nath went on down to the dock, and as he left

nothing of interest behind he occupied his mind with the future. A few minutes before the vessel sailed an automobile dashed into the shed containing a jolly party. She was the first to spring lightly from the car followed by the Other Man carrying an armful of packages—a box of cigars from the Other Man among several parting gifts. Stewards had to be sent scurrying in all directions before Ram Nath was brought from seclusion into the light of the upper deck.

“Why, Ram Nath!” she cried, greeting him with ever so much kindly regret in look and voice. “You have surprised us. Just think of your leaving us like this to go all the way back to India!”

“Yes,” he answered gravely. “I must return to my own people.”

“Bet you’ll be in for a rousing reception when you do get there,” remarked the Other Man, speaking recklessly and without knowledge of the subject.

“Yes—there will be much to be said,” was Ram Nath’s answer.

Thereupon the cry of “All ashore” went up.

“Good-bye, Ram Nath.” She held out her hand frankly. “I am real sorry you are going, and remember, I can’t say how grateful I am for what you have done.”

“Yes,” added the Other Man, patting Ram Nath on the shoulder. “And piles of good luck go with you. We shall expect to hear you’ve been elected Grand Mogul. Maybe some day we’ll take a trip to your country just to see you decked out in gold and jewels.”

Ram Nath went to the rail and stood holding the presents just as they had been thrust into his hands. The last he saw of America was the flutter of a hand-

kerchief through a mist which was not of the atmosphere, and the memory of it remained with him when all else was long forgotten.

"Queer fellow that Ram Nath," remarked the Other Man as he led her back to the car.

"Yes," she nodded. "I never could quite understand him. He seemed so like a—well, a faithful dog. He was so eager to do one's bidding."

Ram Nath reached Bombay in the now uneventful manner. He there exchanged his straw hat for a turban, but otherwise retained his Occidental garb. Then he took a train which crawled up over the Western Ghats and on into the plain of Central India. At last he came in the morning to a way station, where he left the train and climbed into a cart yoked to a pair of bullocks about the stature of big dogs. When it occurred to the driver that the time was propitious for him to start, he grabbed each bullock by the tail and jogged them into an easy trot. Thus all day along a dusty road which seemed to lead nowhither, and with nothing to relieve the eye of a land parched by drought. Finally toward evening thatched huts rising on either side of the road announced the approach to Ram Nath's town. As he glanced from the bullock cart he observed no change, no hopeful progressive sign of any kind. The half-nude figures lounging near their huts appeared thinner and gaunter of limb than when he had departed, and the ravenous crows and cur dogs fought more fiercely for any already clean-picked bone discovered.

Many would die of famine, but enough always remained to replenish the age-weary stock. For a moment his thoughts flew backward, contrasting this land

of his birthright with the one he might have wished to adopt.

Ram Nath's father was reckoned as a man of possessions; therefore a mud wall inclosed a small court and the rambling roofs of the family dwellings. At the gate of the court sat Ram Nath's father, just as he had sat there when Ram Nath bade him a dutiful farewell. From the old man's motionless pose a stranger might have taken him for a permanent fixture, never lifting his eyes from the ground or acknowledging the respectful salaams of the passer. He was waiting for Ram Nath. With a tinkle of bells the bullock cart was pulled up before the gate and Ram Nath descended. The old man lifted his head and shot a piercing, all-embracing glance upon the figure of his son. For an instant the eyes of father and son met. Then Ram Nath hung his head as one convicted of a crime. No word was spoken, no greeting exchanged. Ram Nath's father had marked the absence of his son's caste mark, and by other signs that which proclaimed him a sacrilegious outcast—an eater of sacred flesh—an abomination in the sight of gods and men. The old man rose with the painful travail of years, gathered his robe about his loins and passed in at the gate. Ram Nath knew better than to attempt to follow. Without a sign the old man turned, closed the gate and bolted it securely. Ram Nath, with his A. M. degree, was shut out utterly from the communion of his family. Had his pockets been filled with gold it would have mattered nothing so far as that parental sentence was concerned. On behalf of Ram Nath's father it may be said, such is the rule of caste, he would not have dared to do otherwise.

'And that was the "rousing reception" given to Ram Nath. A little later, when darkness screened the act, the gate was opened stealthily and a bowl of food set outside by a woman's hand. But the gate was quickly closed when he made a movement to restrain the donor, and Ram Nath knew that, rather than eat from that bowl into which his fingers dipped hungrily, each member of the family would prefer to die of starvation.

For Ram Nath there remained but one course open. He must propitiate the temple priests in order to regain his caste. He sought them without delay. But when they heard his plea, judgment was delivered according to the measure of his sin as applied to the height from which he had fallen. Before the sacred thread could again be wound over his shoulder, or the trident caste mark set upon his forehead, he must make a pilgrimage to the holy river Ganges. Also he must give a sum of money to the temple which Ram Nath knew was utterly beyond the straitened means of his family, even if all the women's trinkets went into the melting pot.

Ram Nath therefore did not return to his father's gate, and the bowl of food which was surreptitiously placed outside next evening remained untouched. Ram Nath discarded his Occidental clothes, shaved his Occidental clipped hair, and with staff in hand started off to regain his caste.

Thus Ram Nath, A. M., is to be encountered at a spot on the Ganges bank many hundreds of miles distant from his native town. He would hardly be recognized by his former American fellow students, even less so by her who made great reputation in the Vedic dance. In a tattered sheet he sells wreaths of marigold flowers to pilgrims. He has performed the first act of puri-

fication by bathing in the holy river, and he hopes to regain his sacred thread at the hands of the Brahmin priests by the proceeds from the sale of his wreaths of marigold flowers. In the fullness of time perhaps this will come to pass. But never, never until that fortunate hour arrives can he associate with his own kind. He is not even Ram Nath, but a nameless outcast—though, to be sure, he is still an A. M. of an American university.